Poe, Plagiarism, and the Prescriptive Right of the Mob

Jonathan Elmer

1. EPIGRAPH

I begin with an unavoidable and entirely uncontroversial thesis: "William Wilson" (1839) is a psychological drama about the harassments of conscience. The thesis is uncontroversial because it seems to be the accepted interpretation of the tale; for this reason alone, one could argue, it must inevitably be taken into account.[1] But it is unavoidable for a more immediate reason as well, namely, that we cannot enter the tale without first encountering the epigraph Poe places at its threshold, and which imprints with typographical insistence the word "CONSCIENCE" on our reading memory: "What say of it? what say of CONSCIENCE grim, / That spectre in my path?"[2] Although the word "conscience" does not reappear in the rest of the tale, it will henceforth be almost impossible to understand the narrator's double as anything other than his conscience: the double does, in fact, turn out to be rather humorless and "grim," and his meddlesome behavior certainly justifies his designation as "That spectre in [the narrator's] path." Before detailing all the thematic elements which support such an understanding, however, we should note that our interpretation of "William Wilson" as a story about conscience has in an important way been determined in advance. In thus affecting our access to the tale, the epigraph has, as it were, intervened from without; and in this sense the epigraph itself is a "spectre in [our] path," one which will be as hard to evade as Wilson's double.

Poe was fond of epigraphs, and used them in almost all of his tales to delay the introduction of the main narrative and to indicate the key terms in which the story is to be understood. Poe's critical stance with regard to epigraphs, however, was more ambivalent than his ready use of them might seem to indicate. In one of his lengthy reviews of Longfellow's poems, Poe takes up the issue of "prose remarks prefacing the narrative," and concludes that the "practice of prefixing explanatory passages is utterly at variance with . . . unity [of effect]."[3] In a typically acute analysis of the reading experience, Poe explains why this is so:

> By the prefix, we are either put in possession of the subject of the poem; or some hint, historic fact, or suggestion, is thereby afforded, not included in the body of the piece, which, without the hint, is incomprehensible. In the latter case, while

> perusing the poem, the reader must revert, in mind at least, to the prefix, for the necessary explanation. In the former, the poem being a mere paraphrase of the prefix, the interest is divided between the prefix and the paraphrase. In either instance the totality of effect is destroyed. (*Essays,* 691)

Poe is talking about poems here, but his conception of the prose tale demanded the same attention to "unity" of effect. In "William Wilson," the epigraph's applicability to the tale certainly seems to give it, retrospectively, the kind of "explanatory" power to which Poe alludes above, even if that power is limited to naming the subject of the narrative—"conscience"—which is not named elsewhere: in this sense the epigraph does put us "in possession of the subject." According to Poe, the precedence of the prefix—a precedence both temporal and spatial since, as Poe emphasizes, the prefix is exterior, "not included in the body of the piece"—does not simply divide our attention (or double it, we might say, given that we are considering "William Wilson"); it also threatens to reverse the normal relation between text and gloss, with the ostensibly "explanatory" prefix becoming the "subject" of which the text itself comes to seem merely the "paraphrase." The preemptive power of the epigraph or prefix, at least in this account, tends inevitably to disturb the reading experience, volatilizing the relation between text and interpretation, doubling and dividing our reading, destroying *from the beginning* the unity of effect.

The effect of the epigraph on our reading of "William Wilson" hardly seems so dramatic; indeed, rather than disturbing our understanding of the tale, the presence of the word "conscience" would seem to confer on it a kind of integrity and coherence. But then we must admit that the effect of the epigraph is to give us the closure before we have the text, the answer before we have the question, the "subject" of the tale before we have the "body" of the text. I am putting pressure on Poe's epigraph because it seems to contain, incognito, an ambiguous dynamic of textual identity that the tale itself elaborates at greater length. For what, after all, does it mean to be "put in possession of the subject" of a tale like "William Wilson," which insistently calls into question the very notions of both "subject" and "possession"? Is it not at least somewhat suspicious that the epigraph grants us so painlessly, so guilelessly, the principle of unity and identity of a text that describes in unusual detail the dissolution of individual identity, the collapse of subjective unity? The critical "subject" *of* the tale—the topic of conscience—is made to seem singular, while the "subject" *in* the tale—William Wilson—is precisely split apart by the advent of the double who apparently embodies that other "critical subject" that is one's conscience. What is division at the level of the *récit,* the narrated content, is unity at the level of the *discours,* or interpretive frame. To be put in possession of the subject of "William Wilson," then, entails a certain confusion between interpretive and moral judgments, between critical evaluations and evaluations of conscience, a confusion that is one important source of the frictional energy of this uncanny tale.

We can already find in the epigraph, then, the interpenetration of questions of subjective identity, property, and textuality which becomes the figural current running through the entirety of "William Wilson." One further oddity of

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the epigraph points us toward a fuller understanding of what might be at stake for Poe in this interpenetration. The citation from Chamberlayne is incorrectly attributed to his *Pharonnida*: Mabbott surmises that Poe's epigraph is actually a "confused echo" of the following lines from another play by Chamberlayne, *Love's Victory:* "Conscience waits on me like the frighting shades / Of ghosts when gastly [*sic*] messengers of death . . ." (448). Given the importance of naming in the tale, this incorrect attribution should give us pause. Presumably Poe has misremembered the lines from *Love's Victory,* and thus simply attributed his epigraph to the wrong source. But it is also possible that he has fabricated his epigraph quite consciously, dressing it up to look enough like the lines from *Love's Victory* to pass as merely a "confused echo" of them. In either case, we are confronted by a bizarre circumstance. For if Poe *thinks* he didn't write the lines of the epigraph, and Chamberlayne *did not* write them, who did? To whom do these lines belong? And if Poe knowingly wrote the lines of the epigraph and attributed them to Chamberlayne, why should he want to do such a thing? Rather than passing off someone else's work as his own, Poe would thus be passing off his own work as somebody else's. A strange motivation, but not unimaginable: the desire not for appropriation and self-possession, but for the disappropriation and dispossession of the self's textual identity. The lines said to be from Chamberlayne's *Pharonnida,* floating before the entrance to Wilson's narrative, lines which put us in possession of the subject of the tale, are themselves seemingly dispossessed words, not quite the result of Poe's reading nor quite the result of Chamberlayne's writing.

The doubtful status of the epigraph—is it internal or external to the tale "proper"? is its function unifying or divisive? to whom do its words belong?—thus brings into focus the possibility that this tale about doubled identity, dissipation and crime, naming and attribution, property and dispossession, is from the beginning also about reading and its anxieties. And this is to say, as I will argue, that "William Wilson" is about plagiarism, or rather that the problem of plagiarism functions as the horizon for the critical and social anxieties at work in the tale. Only a fuller interpretation both of Poe's stance toward plagiarism and of the tale itself can make this claim convincing, but another curious fact about "William Wilson" is worth considering in this respect. In one of his many charges of plagiarism, Poe accused Hawthorne in May 1842 of including a scene in "Howe's Masquerade" which "resembles a plagiarism" (*Essays,* 575) of the final encounter with the double in "William Wilson."[4] This charge is, from one perspective, patently absurd, since Hawthorne's tale was published a year before Poe's. But it is striking, I think, that the threat of plagiarism would surge forth in Poe's imagination in proximity to his own climactic scene of duelling doubles, in which what had remained until then merely an insidious and doubtful *resemblance* between the characters verges toward a violent unity, or moment of identity. Of course, the temporal absurdity of Poe's accusation—that an earlier text plagiarized a later one—is hard to ignore. On the other hand, once one notices how Poe submits the notion of textual identity in "William Wilson" to a species of retrograde motion and temporal reversal, his accusation conforms to a kind of phantasmatic logic

even in this particular. For in the slippage between interpretive and moral judgments, Poe implies in "William Wilson," one *can't help* putting the cart before the horse; and indeed, when we turn to a consideration of Poe's anxiety over plagiarism, we find out that it is often very difficult even to distinguish the cart from the horse.

2. PLAGIARISM

In an article of several years ago, Neil Hertz offered some explanations for the "tight-lipped institutional fussiness" with which the academy surveys the threat of student plagiarism. He described a pamphlet on "A Writer's Responsibilities" that used to be handed out to freshmen at Cornell, in which the author indulged in a minatory fantasy about the plagiarist who "gets away with it" but who nevertheless "must inevitably" bear somewhere "an ineradicable mark" of guilt and shame.[5] By means of this fantasized "ineradicable mark," the figure who testified to, and exploited, the disconcerting separability of "the self and its signs"[6] is now imagined as embodying the very opposite: "the 'author' of this mark," writes Hertz in the voice of fantasy, "will be inseparable from it; here, for once—so the wish would have it—mark, paper and author will be fused."[7] There is doubtless a kind of satisfaction in the censure of a discovered plagiarist, in the putting-to-right of the links between selves and signs. But such a pleasure cannot match the covert love for the one who got away, since it is only the latter who allows both for this compensatory fantasy of the integration of self and sign, *and,* as Hertz elaborates, a residual, contradictory but equally wishful *illegibility* of the self:

> [T]he aim of such fantasies of moral legibility, whether they are elaborated by sinners or judges, is precisely that exciting confusion of ethical and hermeneutical motifs; for fantasies are compromise-formations, they seek to have things both ways. Our paragraph about plagiarism offers just such a compromise: the ineradicable mark is there to satisfy the interpreter's wish to read stable and undeceptive signs, while the unknowable suffering is there to satisfy the teacher's wish to be something other than a reader—it serves as an acknowledgement of an interiority opaque enough to baffle his hermeneutical skills, a residual *je-ne-sais-quoi* that is there to remind him of (and, specularly, to confirm him in) his own private humanity.[8]

The teacher's relation to the plagiarist who gets away with it is, as Hertz says, specular: in investing this figure with both the attributes of pure legibility and the opacity of a "private humanity," the teacher projects a figure *combining* the wishful notions of selfhood which are otherwise in contradiction. This is what provides the "excitement" of the "confusion of ethical and hermeneutical motifs." And it is this same confusion that lies at the heart of who or what constitutes the ethical or hermeneutic "subject" of "William Wilson." But this excitement is the product of an *ambivalence* toward the specular figure of the plagiarist who gets away with it, for specular doubles—as for instance in Lacan's account of the mirror stage—tend to serve as the focus both of the self's jubilation before a confirming and "ideal unity," and of the aggression which

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To claim that the plagiarist is an instance of the Lacanian specular ego may seem to highlight the figure's containment by a trans-historical or trans-cultural logic. There may be such a logic, but it is not what interests me here. For even if there are specular doubles in all times and places, they do not always have the same features. Hertz's analysis of the institutional "threat" of plagiarism, for example, presupposes certain structures and concepts, such as: an educational apparatus in which culture is "inscribed" on the minds of the more or less anonymous "young"; the acceptance of a split between public and private selves; particular notions of property and intellectual property; and, perhaps most importantly, an imagined relation to a socioeconomic realm of *circulation,* in which texts and ideas and even people can successfully circulate, pretending to be things they are not and *get away with it.* Such structures and concepts determine historically the form in which the seemingly universal figure of the double makes its appearance.

I have laid out in some detail the contradictions and ambivalences arising from one familiar posture toward plagiarism, so that in turning now to Poe he won't look like such a nut. For if there is a quick way to describe Poe's relation to the problem of plagiarism, it would be as outrageous and deliberately provocative. In the series of papers dubbed "The Little Longfellow War," Poe flings about bizarre accusations, tendentious analyses of plagiarism, and generally indulges in an irritating species of innuendo. But Poe's very critical and theoretical incoherence in this episode conforms, I would argue, to the logic of ambivalence identified by Hertz. For as the tediousness of his contributions to the Longfellow War suggests, Poe is less interested in resolving specific conflicts over plagiarism than in having the debate continue: his apparent ambivalence arises, as it does for Hertz's emblematic teacher, from the fact that his interest in exposing specific instances of plagiarism is exceeded by his investment in the problem as such. We might say this investment has to do with Poe's recognition that the debate intrigued the magazine readers, that, publicity-conscious as he always was, he simply knew good copy when he saw it. On one level this is surely correct: Poe was probably more widely known as a contentious critical personality than as anything else (save as author of "The Raven"), and he quite self-consciously exploited this role. But to write off Poe's odd passion for debates over plagiarism as simply a play for what today would be called a larger "market share" is to ignore the way publicity and critical personae were for Poe *theoretical* issues concerning the nature of identity; how plagiarism itself, as a theoretical issue, brought into focus the anxieties surrounding the possibility of a critical identity in what we might call the mass-textual world of publication.

That Poe saw his engagement with the topic of plagiarism as a confrontation between the critic and the world of publicity is fairly clear in his sparring with the anonymous defender of Longfellow, who signed his pieces "Outis" (Greek for Nobody). Outis' recourse to pseudonymy amounts, in Poe's view, to a retreat behind anonymity, a practice common in the magazine criticism of the

day, but one which Poe himself spurned:[10] "One of the most amazing things I have yet seen, is the complacency with which Outis throws to the right and left his anonymous assertions, taking it for granted because he (Nobody) asserts them, I must believe them as a matter of course" (*Essays,* 724). Such anonymity asserts its claim to belief, or so Poe fears, through a kind of identification of itself with the voice of the public; because Outis is Nobody in himself, he can, like General John A. B. C. Smith in Poe's "The Man That Was Used Up," figure Everybody. From out the vastnesses of publicity, then, Outis' voice comes forward to challenge not only Poe's specific accusations of plagiarism against Longfellow and Aldrich, but the very grounds of plagiarism itself: "What is plagiarism? And what constitutes a good ground for the charge? Did no two men ever think alike without stealing one from the other?" (*Essays,* 709). After adducing some examples, Outis claims that there can be what Poe had called "identities" of thought and phrasing, without there being anything like plagiarism: "What is more natural? Images are not created, but suggested" (*Essays,* 710). His conclusion: "[N]o circumstantial evidence could be sufficient to secure a verdict of *theft* in such a case" (*Essays,* 711). Outis' argument against plagiarism ends by evacuating the notion of originality entirely, invoking instead an idea of linguistic suggestibility in which language operates men, rather than the other way around: common language (images) arising to separate individuals in common circumstances.

Poe's response to this argument bears some examination. Certainly as sensitive as Outis to the ways in which men are determined by language—inhabit it, so to speak—Poe was nevertheless anxious about this idea. Outis, by contrast, seems quite unruffled by the apparent import of his argument against defining plagiarism; he seems, in fact, indifferent, and it is this "complacency" which most irks Poe. Coupled with Outis' apparent readiness to void his distinctive identity in an identification with a general sameness (Nobody and Everybody are equally indistinct), this indifference and this complacency trigger in Poe an anxious response: "The attempt to prove, however, by reasoning *a priori,* that plagiarism cannot exist, is too good an idea on the part of Outis not to be a plagiarism in itself" (*Essays,* 717). Poe's charge does not demarcate critically the grounds for possible plagiarism; rather it extends those bounds by including as potential plagiarisms the critical voice itself issuing its *a priori* reasonings. Indeed, Poe's central strategy in his effort to provide a "definition of the grounds on which a charge of plagiarism may be based" (*Essays,* 758) consists in rendering such definition a hopelessly difficult task. Poe insists that the *principle* of plagiarism must be maintained and asserted at all costs, even if that means that actual judgments of plagiarism, the final tracing of text to identity, will forever be deferred. Like Hertz's ambivalent teacher, Poe seeks to have things both ways: by troubling the definitional boundaries of plagiarism—notably, so that it includes critical statements about the nature of plagiarism—Poe can assert that the boundaries are always in need of re-articulation. That is, Poe's very insistence that there is no text that is *a priori* free of the suspicion of plagiarism is paradoxically dedicated to the possibility of a non-plagiaristic realm. His duplicitous strategy in the debates about originality and plagiarism

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is finally motivated by a desire to keep something for criticism itself; it is, in its odd way, a proprietary motivation. Indeed, we might say that, for Poe, an anxiety about plagiarism is the one thing criticism can properly claim as its own. And Outis' greatest outrage in Poe's eyes is not so much his unconcern about property rights, but his unconcern itself; his phlegmatic *lack of anxiety* marks him, in Poe's view, as both duped and duplicated because not critically vigilant.

But criticism, in this account, is opposed not to writing, but to *reading*, for it turns out that reading is for Poe a state of absorption threatening precisely to the self-detachment that seems to be secured by criticism. In Poe's final words on the plagiarism controversy, he describes the nature of this absorption:

> It appears to me that what seems to be the gross *inconsistency* of plagiarism as perpetrated by a poet, is thus very easily resolved:—the poetic sentiment (even without reference to the poetic power) implies a peculiarly, perhaps an abnormally keen appreciation of the beautiful, with a longing for its assimilation, or absorption, into the poetic identity. What the poet intensely admires, becomes thus, in very fact, although only partially, a portion of his own intellect. It has a secondary origination within his own soul—an origination altogether apart, although springing, from its primary origination without. The poet is thus possessed by another's thought, and cannot be said to take of it, possession. But, in either view, he thoroughly feels it as *his own*—and this feeling is counteracted only by the sensible presence of its true, palpable origin in the volume from which he has derived it—an origin which, in the long lapse of years it is almost impossible *not* to forget—for in the meantime the thought itself is forgotten. But the frailest association will regenerate it—it springs up with all the vigor of a new birth—its absolute originality is not even a matter of suspicion—and when the poet has written it and printed it, and on its account is charged with plagiarism, there will be no one in the world more entirely astounded than himself. Now from what I have said it will be evident that the liability to accidents of this character is in the direct ratio of the poetic sentiment—of the susceptibility to the poetic impression; and in fact all literary history demonstrates that, for the most frequent and palpable plagiarism, we must search the works of the most eminent poets. (*Essays*, 759)

Plagiarism has become a problem of reading: the "poetic sentiment" is a heightened receptivity, a susceptibility to beauty and language which is to be separated from the productive aspect of the "poetic power." Poe describes this receptivity as a kind of active "assimilation, or absorption" of "the beautiful" into the "poetic identity," where it becomes "a portion of [the poet's] intellect." The "primary origination from without" then undergoes a kind of repression—"in the long lapse of years it is almost impossible *not* to forget"—and in this way the plagiarizing poet puts forth the assimilated beauty as if it were his own, "with all the vigor of a new birth." But the active aspect of this process may be rather wishful, for as Poe himself points out, the fact that the "poet feels it as *his own*" is an illusory inversion of the actual temporality of ownership: "The poet is thus possessed by another's thought, and cannot be said to take of it, possession." The proprietary language here implies that the "absorption" works the other way, that the poet's abnormal receptivity marks the moment of his own absorption or assimilation into an entirely other realm

of property.[11] Such an absorption always implies for Poe a kind of immersion in the realm of circulation, the fusion of identities and the collapse of distinctiveness. What is more, this moment of absorption is also that of the individual's *inscription*: thus Poe writes of the "susceptibility to the poetic impression," which would mark the individual as a stamp marks the receptive wax. According both to an ancient figural logic,[12] and, as we shall see, to the psychoanalytic account of the genesis of conscience, such a stamping constitutes the advent of "character." When Poe speaks of "accidents of this character," then, he draws attention—unwittingly, perhaps, but significantly—to what for him is the intolerable way in which "character" *overtakes* one, catches one unawares—at the moment of susceptibility, the moment of reading.

Small wonder, then, that when the poet puts forth the plagiarism as his own, and is shown that it is not his own, "there will be no one in the world more entirely astounded than himself." He will, perhaps, feel the shivering recognition that is the sign of the uncanny. For his attempt to "regenerate" himself in his own production will have been brought back to him as the evidence of his own generation in a long-forgotten absorption. The "vigor of a new birth" will appear to him as the revenance of his own birth. The fundamental fear attached to plagiarism is not that we will be plagiarized, but that we *are plagiarisms;* and the proprietary anxiety is not that our possessions will be taken from us, but that we are ourselves possessed: we "belong properly to books" as Poe writes in his review of Hawthorne (*Essays,* 583). Small wonder, too, that the literary commodity provokes what Samuel Weber (drawing out Marx's own hints) has called the "crisis of perception and representation active in the uncanny,"[13] for that commodity is precisely riven by a doubleness threatening to the self: the ever-present possibility of plagiarism entails the recognition of the Me in the Not-Me, or rather the recognition that the Self is the effect, or the determination, of the (social) Other, that the original is effected or determined by what we might call the aboriginal. What provokes the concern about plagiarism, in other words, is a social anxiety, the unhappy realization that since, as Hannah Arendt has written, "the essence of who somebody is cannot be reified by himself," we are committed to circulation and publicity; that we are, in fact, determined not so much by the Other as by Others, we are the textual precipitate of the social world.[14] Fantasies of originality and self-generation thus always imply an *agon* with the social, and the drama of self-writing (whether the self is "Poe," "America," or "William Wilson") always contains a covert drama of reading, a reading which returns in uncanny fashion to remind us of our "primary origination from without," in others, by others. "William Wilson" presents this agonized drama of self-writing in the face of the aboriginal.

3. THE ANXIOUS BODY OF THE TEXT

If the epigraph has made anything clear, it is that the beginning of Poe's text is not self-evident. Accordingly, I will postpone the analysis of the opening pages of "William Wilson" and jump right into the fray. More specifically, I will turn first to the gambling encounter with Glendinning, which will allow us to situ-

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Wilson succeeds in his gambling career by putting into circulation an identity other than his own: to his friends at Oxford, even the "most abandoned associates," he is "the gay, the frank, the generous William Wilson," whose vices are nothing more serious than "unbridled fancy," "inimitable whim" and a certain "careless and dashing extravagance" (440). The image put into circulation is of a character who cannot stop circulating, who like an unbridled horse dashes about in an excessive wandering: the moral stigma attached to Wilson's extravagance, clearly articulated by Wilson himself in the beginning of the tale, is at bottom the recognition of this suspicious propensity to overstep one's bounds, to move beyond one's proper sphere. As the encounter with Glendinning makes clear, the "proper sphere" is first of all defined as one's social sphere. Wilson's class status is rather unclear: as "the noblest and most liberal commoner at Oxford," in possession of an "enormous income" (440), he seems to occupy a position between commoner and noble. Glendinning is a similarly hybridized specimen, a "young *parvenu* nobleman" (440), one who has arrived at nobility by virtue of his money alone. Wilson and Glendinning are thus perfect players in what René Girard would call mimetic rivalry, since each wants what the other wants, namely riches and the social status they seem to guarantee. Wilson decidedly has the upper hand in this contest, however, since he knows that you have to spend money to make money: "I frequently engaged him in play, and contrived, with the gambler's usual art, to let him win considerable sums, the more effectually to entangle him in my snares" (441).

The image of Wilson as "careless," as in some fundamental sense not entirely in possession of himself, is contradicted by his self-characterization as the methodical and systematic "gambler by profession." Wilson informs us that he is acquainted with "the vilest arts of the gambler by profession," and has become an "adept in his despicable science" (440). The combination of art and science required by this "profession" recalls Poe's notion that such a combination and proportion of faculties is displayed by every genius (including of course himself). Dupin, for instance, is both poet and mathematician, and is imaginative precisely in proportion to his analytic capacity.[15] The comparison to Dupin also reminds us that Wilson's success in swindling Glendinning depends upon a kind of doubling of, or identification with, his antagonist, just as Dupin in "The Purloined Letter" is required to identify his reasoning with that of Minister D— —. That is, Wilson must manipulate his opponent into expressing Wilson's own desire to keep the game going and to double the stakes:

> In a very short period he had become my debtor to a large amount, when, having taken a long draught of port, he did precisely what I had been coolly anticipating—he proposed to double our already extravagant stakes. . . . in less than an hour he had quadrupled his debt. (441-42)

The stakes are "already extravagant" even before they are doubled and redoubled at Glendinning's suggestion, and this is because the entire card game and Glendinning's role in it are already the effects of an initial doubling performed

by Wilson: "To give to this a better coloring, I had contrived to have assembled a party of some eight or ten, and was solicitously careful that the introduction of cards should appear accidental, and originate in the proposal of my contemplated dupe himself" (441). Wilson's ability to have his own desire "originate" with Glendinning, who as "dupe" is both the victim of the con and Wilson's *dup*licate, is the initial extravagance, the first wandering of his self in the place of another. His mastery of Glendinning and control of the technique of doubling is thus due to his ability to circulate not only a reputation, but his very desires, and to have them come back to him in the form of another's desires. In other words, Wilson's appropriation of Glendinning's fortune depends initially on his capacity to *dis*appropriate himself into the place of the other. Spending money to make money is only the superficial version of this technique of disappropriation: Wilson knows that he must also put into circulation both a certain character and his very desires in order to get what he wants.

The importance of this initial disappropriation can be seen in the disastrous dénouement of this scene. Wilson's double bursts into the gambling den and exposes Wilson's ruses to the others: it is as though the extravagant doubling and redoubling of the stakes have caught Wilson up in the wild exchange, as though he has lost control of the doubling process, which now comes back to haunt him. The scene ends, significantly, with the return of property: " 'Mr. Wilson,' said our host, stooping to remove from beneath his feet an exceedingly luxurious cloak of rare furs, 'Mr. Wilson, this is your property' " (444). For both Wilson and the reader, the uncanny moment resides just here, because the return of property, the setting to right of the extravagant circulation, is not the end of doubling, but rather the restitution of the double to its proper place: that is, the "extravagantly costly" cloak handed to Wilson is not his own, which is "already hanging on [his] arm" (444), but the double's perfect facsimile. The uncanny quality of this moment of exposure resides not in the prospect of Wilson losing his property, but in the return of a doubled property, and its assignment as his own. Wilson's "extravagance," his ability to put himself in the place of the other, returns to him as his own property: he is foiled because he is unable to alienate his own alienability, because his own capacity for disappropriating himself turns out to be what is most proper to him, and cannot itself be disappropriated.

But if the cloak figures Wilson's immoral "extravagance," we must also admit that, by its very doubling, the figure becomes riven by a certain ambiguity. For the return of the double's cloak as Wilson's own property reminds us that elsewhere it is Wilson's "virtue" that is figured by a cloaking "mantle." In the second paragraph of the tale, Wilson writes: "Men usually grow base by degrees. From me, in an instant, all virtue dropped bodily as a mantle. From comparatively trivial wickedness I passed, with the stride of a giant, into more than the enormities of an Elah-Gabalus" (426-27). And in the final scene, we are given the "instant" of this transformation: "It was my antagonist—it was Wilson, who then stood before me in the agonies of his dissolution. His mask and cloak lay, where he had thrown them, upon the floor" (448). When the mortally wounded double falls, his cloak is discarded: the two moments are simul-

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The fact that the cloak figures both a morally suspicious "extravagance" and the "mantle of virtue" volatilizes the nature of the moral confrontation which serves as the thematic frame of the tale. When the exposure of wickedness, in the scene with Glendinning, becomes no longer a kind of laying bare, but rather the forced assumption of a double covering, it is the moral relation itself which seems to be registered as uncanny. Freud, of course, has described the genesis of one form of the uncanny double in terms of the psychic split between ego and superego (or conscience):

> The idea of the "double" does not necessarily disappear with the passing of the primary narcissism, for it can receive fresh meaning from the later stages of development of the ego. A special faculty is slowly formed there, able to oppose the rest of the ego, with the function of observing and criticizing the self and exercising a censorship within the mind, and this we become aware of as our "conscience." . . . The fact that a faculty of this kind exists, which is able to treat the rest of the ego like an object . . . renders it possible to invest the old idea of a "double" with a new meaning and to ascribe many things to it, above all, those things which seem to the new faculty of self-criticism to belong to the old surmounted narcissism of the earliest period of all.[16]

There is a curious about-face in these lines, for at the beginning of the passage we are prepared to view the "new faculty" of conscience as itself the double: "we become aware" of this conscience as something opposed, its appearance "renders it possible to invest the old idea of a 'double' with a new meaning." It turns out, however, that this new faculty looks upon the *original* ego as the threatening double, that the doubling of the self enacted in the advent of conscience entails a temporal reversal, whereby the "narcissism of the earliest period of all" becomes marked as temporally secondary or derived—the "double." Formally, this temporal reversal resembles that which the poet unconsciously performs when he takes as "his own" a phrase by which he had earlier been "possessed"; or it is like Poe's insinuation that Hawthorne had plagiarized his later tale; or it is like the ostensibly secondary epigraph taking over a kind of precedence, and making the body of the text seem *its* gloss. In our most immediate context, what Freud's odd passage suggests is that the "double" who hounds William Wilson may be the *victim* of this reversed ascription, that it may be *he* who is primary. We must entertain the notion that the split between Wilson and his double is not an entirely clean one between conscience and "the narcissism of the earliest period of all": and indeed, even if Wilson is the victim of conscience, he nevertheless *himself* exhibits features of the tyrannical superego, while the "double," for his part, displays in a similarly confused way the intrusiveness of conscience *and* a kind of archaic and impregnable narcissism.[17]

We can maintain, in other words, that the double is still the figure of a kind of conscience, of the narrator's superego, as long as we recognize that certain features of this superego retain what I have called an aboriginal status, that the "advent" of the superego which takes place in this moment of psychic doubling

is also simultaneously a kind of archaic return.[18] Such brushes with an archaic or aboriginal source are registered as uncanny, since they are experiences divided between a feeling whose source is strictly unconscious, and the conscious registration of that feeling. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have suggested that affect *per se* is essentially divided and divisive, or as they say, ambivalent: it is this argument they make when they write gnomically that "the affect is the unconscious *as* consciousness."[19] In other words, affect as such is uncanny inasmuch as it registers an encounter with an intrapsychic origin which becomes recognizable only in its simultaneous disappearance: it "invokes what one would have to call a 'restraint' or a 'withdrawal' [*retrait*] whose origin is more archaic than that of any repression."[20]

This double movement of the uncanny affect, a movement in which one is touched or marked with an origin even as that origin recedes, suggests that the uncanniness of the relation between Wilson and his double is the sign of our proximity to what I have called an aboriginal sociality. For to say that the moment of the recognition of conscience is marked simultaneously by affect and consciousness is to focus the entire question of the uncanny and conscience on the notion of identification, which Freud characterized as "a very important form of attachment to someone else, probably the very first, and not the same thing as the choice of an object."[21] As "probably the very first" relation to an other, identification stands at the beginning of sociality in general, as Freud makes clear in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego;* in its role in the construction of the individual psyche, moreover, it performs the crucially socializing function of the installation of the superego. Freud remarks that, through the identification with the parental figure which marks the successful negotiation and outcome of the Oedipal crisis, the child not only assimilates the characteristics of his parents, but also becomes susceptible to all "the influences of those who have stepped in place of parents—educators, teachers, people chosen as ideal models."[22] And indeed, direct parental influence over the contents of the superego seems severely limited by the fact that, as Freud points out, the parents are in turn acting out their own relation to their parental superego: thus, "the child's super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents' super-ego; the contents which fill it are the same and it becomes the vehicle of tradition and all the time-resisting judgments of value which have propagated themselves in this manner from generation to generation."[23] The superego, the conscience, thus becomes less the image of parental restriction than the embodiment of an entire social and cultural system of moral values.

In this regard, it is striking what short shrift is given to Wilson's parents:

> Weak-minded, and beset with constitutional infirmities akin to my own, my parents could do but little to check the evil propensities which distinguished me. Some feeble and ill-directed efforts resulted in complete failure on their part, and, of course, in total triumph on mine. Thenceforward my voice was a household law; and at an age when few children have abandoned their leading-strings, I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions. (427)

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The "complete failure" of Wilson's parents to socialize their child does not result in Wilson's liberation from the social constraints embodied in the superego; on the contrary, through the effective erasure of parental influence, Wilson is placed in an unmediated relation to the social origin of conscience, and the conflict thenceforth takes place as a properly social conflict and no longer simply a familial one. In many of Poe's tales, the narrator performs this elision of the familial through recourse to a notion of "heredity" which, passed down through the generations like the contents of the social superego, enlarges family to the point of its submergence in a "race": "I am the descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable" (427).[24] This "imaginative" and "excitable" temperament—so characteristic of Poe's aesthetico-philosophic maniacs—is also quite close to the kind of affective susceptibility, the "abnormally keen appreciation of the beautiful," that Poe associated, in his arguments over plagiarism, with the "poetic sentiment." And indeed, we can see here again the thematics of the inscription of "character" on such a temperament in Wilson's designation of his hereditary trait as that which renders him "remarkable."

The conflict with Wilson's double, the conflict with conscience, accordingly takes place not in the family home, but in the more socially heterogeneous milieu of the school. Wilson's "remarkable" strength of character at first assures his "ascendancy" there: "In truth, the ardor, the enthusiasm, and the imperiousness of my disposition, soon rendered me a marked character among my schoolmates, and by slow, but natural gradations, gave me an ascendancy over all not greatly older than myself;—over all with a single exception" (431). To be a "marked character" is the sign of power, a distinction which, in the relatively equalized social milieu of the school, amounts to a superiority. But to be a marked character also implies one's susceptibility to be re-marked, implies the submission of one's distinction to a law of repetition, a law which is experienced by Wilson as an intolerable opposition, the opposition of equality: "I secretly felt that I feared him, and could not help thinking the equality which he maintained so easily with myself, a proof of his true superiority; since not to be overcome cost me a perpetual struggle" (432). In contrast to Wilson's energy, energy both offensive and defensive, a kind of inertia characterizes the double, a complete lack of positive exertion: "He appeared to be destitute alike of the ambition which urged, and of the passionate energy of mind which enabled me to excel. In his rivalry he might have been supposed actuated solely by a whimsical desire to thwart, astonish, or mortify myself" (432). The double's phlegmatic nature is reminiscent of the complacency of Outis; and, as with Outis, we can suspect that the inertia and indifference characteristic of the double are associated with the social mass of publicity. Thus, it is no surprise that the double's equanimity seems to render him impervious to revenge in the form of social mockery: "my namesake had much about him, in character, of that unassuming and quiet austerity which, while enjoying the poignancy of its own jokes, has no heel of Achilles in itself, and absolutely refuses to be laughed at" (433). This equanimity of the double, his serene assumption of an equality, is experienced by Wilson as the sign of a superiority which he must struggle

against. It is the sign of the double's *indifference,* in both senses of the word, and this indifference constitutes the double (and thus the social world of conscience) as a figure of the democratic social ideal, an oppressive and inert abstraction which, in Wilson's words, seems motivated solely by a desire to "thwart, astonish and mortify" the individual's will to differentiate and excel.

Such an analysis explains why Wilson's attitude toward his double is marked by a kind of nervous class antagonism: "I had always felt aversion to my uncourtly patronymic, and its very common, if not plebeian praenomen," writes Wilson, with a fussiness of vocabulary that indicates his desire to distance himself from the "very common" textual identity that is his name, and which his double so intolerably shares with him. As in the scene with Glendinning, there is in Wilson's attitude toward his name a kind of class confusion that he finds appalling, but nevertheless tends to promote: "notwithstanding a noble descent, mine was one of those everyday appellations which seem, by prescriptive right, to have been, time out of mind, the common property of the mob" (431). If Wilson is of "noble descent" here, his nobility is simply unidentifiable, since his name, which as patronymic should signal nobility unambiguously, is itself the "common property of the mob." (The same confusion is at work in Wilson's reference to himself as "the noblest and most liberal commoner" at Oxford). In short, Wilson's distinction of "descent" is indistinguishable, lost in the indifference of the "common property of the mob"; his name, the figure and guarantor of individual and class identity, is not his own, he does not possess it, but is possessed by it. Such are the proprietary and legal connotations of the phrase, "by prescriptive right": the *OED* cites Blackstone in reference to "Lords of manors . . . who have to this day a prescriptive right to grant administration to their intestate tenants and suitors"; that is, the right to certain actions and control based on uninterrupted possession. The *OED* also cites Burke, who draws out this sense of archaic possession "time out of mind": "Our constitution is a prescriptive constitution; it is a constitution whose sole authority is, that it has existed time out of mind."

Burke's usage turns us toward a more etymological understanding of the phrase, as that which is "written before," *prae-scribere.* The British constitution has always been *before;* it is, in fact, as much "before writing" as "written before." Michael Warner, in his provocative analysis of the role of publication in the construction of an America *res publica* of letters, has shown how for the Revolutionary generation the British Constitution served as the scandalous model of a transcendent authority, one standing outside of the system it authorizes. The American Constitution, Warner has argued, strives precisely to undo such authority (understood as "tyranny" by the colonists), or rather it aims to relocate it as immanent *to writing.* Moreover, he shows (and here he follows Derrida) that the indeterminacy which allows for such a relocation of authority is precisely the uncertainty as to whether "the people" existed before the writing of independence, or have come into existence with that writing.[25] To say, on the other hand, that "the mob" retains a "prescriptive right" is to close off this indeterminacy, and to posit the mob as always already before any writing. That the mob has a "prescriptive" right to Wilson's name thus appears as an

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intolerable obstacle to an effective self-origination, inasmuch as it limits the possibility of self-making through self-designation, or through the signature. "Prescriptive right" is that which always precedes and finally escapes any attempted self-writing. Wilson's attempted erasure of his parents retains the trace of this prescriptive precedence: "I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, *in all but name,* the master of my own actions" (427, my emphasis). Wilson's independence, his originality, will always be limited by the preemptive naming to which he has been subject, which has prescribed him.

This is why it is not enough for Wilson simply to affirm the "complete failure" of his parents, and remove them from his narration; he must go further and literally name himself: "Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. The fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation." The essential conflict of the tale is contained in this opening line. For the recourse to pseudonymy attests to the desire to write the self, to retain self-possession precisely through an act of disappropriation: one affirms absolute originality through the act of alienating one's own textual identity—one's given name—like any other piece of property. The gesture is, however, entirely futile, since *whatever* name Wilson gives himself *must be shared by the double* if he is to tell his story; in order to write himself, in other words, Wilson must necessarily succumb to the prescription of the name. Self-writing, as the desire for the disappropriation of the self's textual identity, entails the return to the self of that very capacity for disappropriation, that alienability of identity, as precisely what is proper to the self. Self-writing is unalterably and properly double, it is the *writing of the double,* a phrase in which we can read the undecidable oscillation of identity in the undecidability of the genitive: the writing *by* the double, or the writing *about* the double. If declarations of independence, as Derrida claims, necessarily waver between constative and performative modes, we can in fact see Wilson's pseudonym as the enacted allegory of that undecidability: "William Wilson," as signature, is simultaneously performative—Will-I-am: I proclaim myself Will, faculty of effectiveness and performativity, "master of my own actions"—and descriptive—Will's Son: I am the product of another who has preceded, I am created and not self-creating.

Thus, the power of the double over Wilson is finally simply his power to iterate Wilson's name, or better, to bring home to him its iterability: "The words"—of his name: again, to describe one's name as "words" is a gesture of defamiliarization answering the desire for disappropriation of the self's textual identity—"the words were venom in my ears; and when, upon the day of my arrival, a second William Wilson came also to the academy, I felt angry with him for bearing the name, and doubly disgusted with the name because a stranger bore it, who would be the cause of its twofold repetition . . ." (434). The double's tyranny over Wilson resides in this ability to remind the latter of the iterability of his name, while as the activity of conscience, it is in still another sense the power of prescription. It is striking that, while we are told that the double's "interference often took the ungracious character of advice; advice not openly given, but hinted or insinuated" (435), we are not given enough

evidence of such advice to make a judgment about its content. Only twice do we witness such "interference," and in neither case do the double's words look anything like advice. The first case is the exposure of Wilson's cheating in the encounter with Glendinning, which is meddling enough, but cannot properly be called advice. The second though earlier instance is when Wilson is interrupted in his all-night revels at Eton:

> As I put my foot over the threshold, I became aware of the figure of a youth about my own height, and habited in a white kerseymere morning frock, cut in the novel fashion of the one I myself wore at the moment. This the faint light enabled me to perceive; but the features of his face I could not distinguish. Upon my entering, he strode hurriedly up to me, and, seizing me by the arm with a gesture of petulant impatience, whispered the words "William Wilson!" in my ear. I grew perfectly sober in an instant. (439)

Like the return of the doubled cloak in the episode with Glendinning, the double's intervention here consists solely of an uncanny re-minder, the return to Wilson of his own doubleness. If this is "advice," it is of a peculiar sort, not so much a prescriptive order as the simple calling-to-mind of the fact of prescription per se. It is like the "petulant impatience" of a parent who asserts a proprietary power over his or her child by the full articulation of the name he or she has bestowed upon the child: "Edgar Allan Poe, come here this instant!" Such an intervention amounts to the *enforcement of the name,* the appellation which exists only to be sounded and called. The prescriptive power of ideology—"all the time-resisting judgements of value" Freud finds stored up in the superego—may reside less in the content of its prescriptions than in its readiness to remind its subjects that they have been prescribed, already written, always ready to be read.[26]

The "prescriptive right of the mob," then, in all its resonances—proprietary, writerly, ideological—derives from a kind of archaic sociality which, because it both underlies and undoes individual originality, I have called aboriginal. Wilson's erasure of his parents turned us toward this aboriginal sociality, but it is the double who confronts us with its faceless figure. At one point, Wilson senses the double's aboriginality:

> I discovered, or fancied I discovered, in his accent, his air, and general appearance, a something which startled, and then deeply interested me, by bringing to mind dim visions of my earliest infancy—wild, confused and thronging memories of a time when memory herself was yet unborn. I cannot better describe the sensation which oppressed me, than by saying that I could with difficulty shake off the belief of my having been acquainted with the being who stood before me, at some epoch very long ago—some point of the past even infinitely remote. (436)

"The being" whose presence Wilson senses is, in fact, not out of his "earliest infancy" but prior to that, from a time when "memory herself was yet unborn." The point in time prior to memory will always in effect be the "point of the past infinitely remote"; it is the time of aboriginality which lies outside of anything like cognition, "more archaic," as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write, "than any repression." "The delusion, however, faded rapidly as it came," con-

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tinues Wilson; he means, perhaps, that "the delusion faded *as* rapidly as it came," but his elision of "as" allows us to take the phrase as designating the recognition Wilson here experiences as a moment of pure vanishing, inaccessible to any wakeful consciousness, present only as affect or, as he writes, "sensation." The "sensation" evoked in this moment of pure vanishing is the sign that Wilson finds himself in contact with the aboriginal, the fluid medium of the dissolution of identities which precedes all identity. This aboriginal medium is terrifying because it is objectless, prior to individuation. Thus Wilson's description of his silent encounter with the sleeping figure of his double must not be dismissed as simply overexerted Gothicism: "I looked;—and a numbness, an iciness of feeling pervaded my frame. My breast heaved, my knees tottered, my whole spirit became possessed with an objectless yet intolerable horror" (437). The horror is "objectless" because the double is not an object; what Wilson's "spirit" becomes "possessed" by is the unfigurable matrix of individuality which is not, in itself, individual, but is rather the dissolution, division, and doubling which precedes individuality. This is why the double's "countenance" is described as shrouded in obscurity at his moments of intervention: the face, symbol of the inalienable uniqueness of the personality, does not finally belong to the double; as simultaneous guarantor and disrupter of all the face stands for, the double remains faceless, unfigurable.

But if the double is unfigured, it does not follow that he does not figure. His prescriptive power resides precisely in his power to inscribe. Wilson's sense that the double hearkens back to a time "when memory herself was yet unborn" is terrifying for him because, in keeping with his desire to write himself, he would like to claim a uniquely complete memory:

> Yet I must believe that my first mental development had in it much of the uncommon—even much of the *outré*. Upon mankind at large the events of very early existence rarely leave in mature age any definite impression. All is gray shadow—a weak and irregular remembrance—an indistinct regathering of feeble pleasures and phantasmagoric pains. With me this is not so. In childhood I must have felt with the energy of a man what I now find stamped upon memory in lines as vivid, as deep, and as durable as the *exergues* of the Carthaginian medals. (430)

Wilson's desire to write himself, to affirm his complete originality, is in plain view here: he is "uncommon," an exception from "mankind at large" precisely to the extent that he has not lost himself in the "gray shadow" of "irregular remembrance"; indeed, he implies that he sprang into the world fully matured, feeling everything "with the energy of a man." But the anxiety attending such affirmations is equally legible in this passage, for after all, what Wilson describes as the reason for his total recall is, from another perspective, the testimony of his formation from without, his passive reception of a series of affects which stamp him in a process which is here literally the *inscription of character*.[27]

It is this insistent, though sometimes occluded, troubling of the idea of a time "when memory herself was yet unborn," which leads to Wilson's repeated need to start anew. Any reader of "William Wilson" will have been struck by

the apparently excessive length of the introductory pages in which Wilson lingers over the details of his school in all their architectural exactitude (or incomprehensibility). I would suggest that these descriptions indicate that we are to take Wilson's entire narration as in some sense prefatory, and that the attention to architectural details throughout the story provides a half-hidden thematics of what we might call the *preliminary,* in the sense of that which stands before the threshold. Wilson is, at one point, explicit about the preliminary nature of his narrative: "I would not, if I could, here or to-day, embody a record of my later years of unspeakable misery, and unpardonable crime. This epoch—these later years—took unto themselves a sudden elevation in turpitude, whose origin alone it is my present purpose to assign" (426). Wilson's tale is the effort to "assign" the "origin" of his own life, to bracket the series of encounters with his double as the prelude or preface to a life which he will not tell; his recourse to a pseudonym is the performance of this "assignment"; but this self-writing is only possible because Wilson has, in the final encounter with the double, already murdered himself. Wilson can assign his origin only because he has signed his own death-warrant: "*henceforward art thou also dead—dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope!*" (448); one can describe one's birth only from beyond the grave. In this way, "William Wilson" is like many of Poe's tales which position their writing as simultaneously the record and the result of a passage through death. While the "instant" of transformation at the end of the tale is a pure fusion of identities, what Wilson calls the "most absolute identity" (448), it is also simultaneously a moment of pure dissolution, death, and division. Thus, the confusion of voices Wilson experiences—"I could have fancied that I myself was speaking"—is no mere figure of speech, for if at the end the double proclaims Wilson's death "to Heaven and to Hope," Wilson will repeat that pronouncement at the beginning of the tale: "Oh, outcast of all outcasts most abandoned—to the earth art thou not forever dead? . . . and a cloud, dense dismal, and limitless, does it not hang eternally between thy hopes and heaven?" (426). Both thematically and formally, Wilson's murder of the double is the "origin" of the self-writing he performs in the tale as a whole, and the pseudonymous signature which stands at the beginning of the tale is thus simultaneously an act of self-generation and the pre-emptive repetition of the suicide at the tale's close.

But the circularity of the tale, the way in which the initial signature repeats the final act of self-murder, is perceptible only retroactively: the tale's peculiar temporality is one in which the origin is shown to be a repetition of the end, but always only *after the fact.* In this way, the tale forces the reader to misrecognize its own preliminary nature, forces him to read as the tale itself what is in fact only its preface; the tale forces the reader into putting the cart before the horse. This repetition of the preliminary is thematized in the encounters with the double, which characteristically take place in a closed and confining space of some kind of introductory passage: a "small ante-chamber" (in the final scene), "the vestibule of the building" (in the scene at Eton). "As I put my foot over the threshold, I became aware of the figure of a youth" (439): the recognition of the double is coincident with a kind of transgression, a stepping over the

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threshold. This architectural thematics is developed in the lengthy description of the various vestibules and subdivisions of the schoolhouse, as well as the careful enumeration of the "periodical egressions and ingressions" (429) from the school grounds. Just as he does in "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe here develops an identity between his text and the architecture which serves as that text's setting.[28] This identity is most legible in Wilson's first description of the schoolhouse: "But the house!—how quaint an old building was this!—to me how veritably a palace of enchantment! There was really no end to its windings—to its incomprehensible subdivisions. It was difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be" (429). It is impossible to move around in this house without crossing thresholds; in its "incomprehensible subdivisions," the house demands, as it were, constant transgression. The fact that these partitions are "incomprehensible," moreover, guarantees that such transgression will always be performed unwittingly; one will always unknowingly have stepped over some threshold already. And the situation is finally the same for the reader of this house-text, for we too can never "say with certainty upon which of its two stories" we find ourselves. These "two stories" are not only those of Wilson and his double; they are also the two stories that arise from the reader's recognition at the end of the tale that what he took to be the moment of beginning was in fact the repetition of the tale's end. The "two stories" are those of a doubled origin: the story which tells the origin, and that which, after the fact, tells the story of the origin's repetition of an always already misrecognized, and hence effaced, aboriginality.

The recognition that in reading the tale we have been moving through a series of introductory passages—in both the literary and architectural senses of the phrase—returns us to the problem of the epigraph, which now comes to seem the first prescription, the first threshold passed over unwittingly by the reader. If this epigraph puts us "in possession of the subject" of the tale, that subject must now necessarily seem double. As the subject of the tale, "conscience" has been shown to be merely the power of the double; to be put in possession of such a subject is thus not any escape from doubleness, but rather it is the return of the subject's doubleness—its prior dispossession or essential alienability—as what is proper to it.

But the question now arises: why would Poe be interested in producing such an effect? What does he have at stake in making the reader realize that his or her critical seizure of the tale, as a tale about conscience, is itself the first instance of this misrecognition of the preliminary? It would seem that Poe has a contradictory agenda in the tale. On the one hand, he wishes to *recreate* the temporal confusion he had described, in his articles about plagiarism, as arising from a structure of reading, the confusion whereby we take "as our own" a thought, or idea, or critical prescription that we are in fact possessed by. On the other hand, he wishes to display this confusion, perhaps even to deconstruct it—in any case, to have us *realize* that we have been confused. The uncanniness of Poe's tale, the vague sense of unease, even mild irritation, would seem to be the product of this induced confusion about confusion. As so often with Poe, the reader does not know exactly where to stand. I would even go so

far as to say that "William Wilson" aims to produce in the reader a kind of anxiety. And indeed, anxiety itself, as both a theoretical problem and as a passion of the psyche, is finally the undefinable locale of the contradictions Poe's tale enacts. Writing about Freud's difficult negotiations with the problem of anxiety, Samuel Weber has pointed out its inherently paradoxical nature. On the one hand, anxiety is a signal which serves the ego's desire to master through repetition a trauma it could not foresee or prepare for in its first appearance. On the other hand, anxiety itself is a threat which will need a repetition to be mastered. Thus, anxiety submits the ego to a strangely inverted temporality, namely the attempt to delimit or master by anticipation a trauma that has necessarily *already* taken place; and in doing this it reinforces the necessity of always repeating this anticipatory repetition, since it necessarily submits the ego anew to an unmastered affect (of anxiety). Weber writes:

> For as an affect, anxiety "disturbs" and "interferes" with the theoretical effort to identify it, to explain it in terms of cause and effect. What Freud is therefore constrained to do is to separate anxiety from its affect, which is also its effect. For that effect cannot be limited to or determined exclusively as the ego's response to a danger, since anxiety itself can become the danger to which it reacts. Freud's attempt, in seeking to replace his earlier "economic" theory by a "topical" one, is intended to put anxiety in its proper place. But his own discussion demonstrates that anxiety *has no proper place*: it marks the impossible attempt of the ego to construct and delimit such a place, but this place is inevitably displaced, dislocated, enstellt.[29]

I suggested earlier that for Poe an anxiety about plagiarism was the one thing that criticism could properly claim as its own. We can now see the paradox of such a formulation. For if the problem of critical identity entails a vigilance before the possibility of plagiarism, it is a vigilance of anxiety, an anticipation of something that, in Poe's own analysis, *will have already happened.* Such an anxiety is the anxiety of self-ownership, and it is also the undoing of all possibilities of ownership or possession. Poe writes his tale in order to anticipate, in the mode of anxiety, the prescription of the mob, and to redefine this social origin as secondary, just as Wilson redefines his "double," or as Poe himself redefines Hawthorne's tale. But as we have seen, and as Poe's tale displays, such anticipations are themselves doomed to repetition. Plagiarism is impossible to prove but constantly threatened, ceaselessly anticipated as having possibly already happened. To hold fast to an anxiety about plagiarism as properly one's own is to hold on to one's undoing in the social as the only source of one's individual identity. It is simultaneously to submit to and to claim as one's own the prescriptive right of the mob.

NOTES

1. For a typical reading, see Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 209-13. Three days after finishing the first draft of this essay, I picked up Evan Carton's excellent work. Forty pages into the book, there is an interpretation of "William Wilson" in which Carton emphasizes a great many of the same aspects of the tale as I do: the emphasis on naming, pseudonymy, retroactive tem-

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2. Edgar Allan Poe, *The*
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3. Edgar Allan Poe, *Essa*
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4. For a fuller account
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5. Neil Hertz, "Two
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6. Hertz, 63.

7. Hertz, 61.

8. Hertz, 62.

9. The phrase "ideal u
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10. See Michael Allen, *I*
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porality, writing as suicide, etc. "I grew perfectly sober in an instant," as Wilson said, soon recognizing the affect as the uncanniness—more than a *frisson,* I should point out—that accompanies encounters with one's double. Carton's interpretation forced me to give up my originality, in a sense, and to admit my own dependence on a kind of aboriginality; the consolation being, of course, that my essay, in its own aboriginal or preemptive way, had already accounted for the experience I was now having in the wake of its completion. See Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), 36-41.

2. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe,* ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1968-78), vol. 2, 426. Further references to Poe's fiction are to this edition and are given—by page number only—in the main text.

3. Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews,* ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 691. Further references to Poe's criticism are to this edition and are included in the main text.

4. For a fuller account of this accusation, see Robert Regan, "Hawthorne's 'Plagiary'; Poe's Duplicity," *The Naiad Voice: Essays on Poe's Satiric Hoaxing,* ed. Dennis W. Eddings (Port Washington: Associated Faculty Press, 1983), 73-87.

5. Neil Hertz, "Two Extravagant Teachings," in "The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre," *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 60-71.

6. Hertz, 63.

7. Hertz, 61.

8. Hertz, 62.

9. The phrase "ideal unity" comes from "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," while "alienating destination" can be found in "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," both of which are collected in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

10. See Michael Allen, *Poe and the British Magazine Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969), 47: "only in three articles did [Poe] take advantage of anonymity as the earlier journalists had done."

11. Poe's account of the "anxiety of influence" sounds at moments like a "strong misreading" of Harold Bloom, a temporal reversal which is the peculiar effect of the revisionary ratio Bloom labels "apophrades": successful practitioners of this "most cunning of revisionary ratios . . . achieve a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time almost is overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors.*" See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London: Oxford UP, 1973), 141. It is amusing to consider Bloom as having managed to make Poe sound like an imitator of his, amusing mostly because such a connection implicitly grants that he is engaged in an agon with Poe, whom Bloom has consistently dismissed as a weak writer. On the other hand, Bloom has also quite powerfully characterized Poe as "inescapable," especially for the American reader. It is tempting to see Poe as one of Bloom's strong precursors, in a repressed (because antithetical) composite with Emerson, Bloom's avowed Father-figure. When Emerson writes that "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty," the experience of one's dispossession by books is converted into personal power, as Bloom recognizes approvingly; Poe's own account of the readerly agon, which I have cited above, tends to telescope and conflate the characteristic Bloomian (and Emersonian) moments, so that the poet's strong misreading becomes in fact the first moment of an irrevocable dispossession and loss. On Poe's "inescapability," see Harold Bloom, "Inescapable Poe," *The New York Review of Books,* 11 October 1984: 23-37.

12. For a detailed and provocative account of this logic, see "Typography" in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics,* ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 43-138. In the original Greek meaning, "char-

acter" is "a mark engraved or impressed, the impress on coins and seals," from which is derived the metaphoric sense of the "mark impressed (as it were) on a person or thing, a distinctive mark, characteristic." See Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek Lexikon* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), 882.

13. Samuel Weber, "The Sideshow, Or: Remarks on a Canny Moment," *Modern Language Notes* 88 (1973), 1133.

14. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958), 210-11.

15. See "The Murders in the Rue Morgue": "Between ingenuity and the analytic ability there exists a difference far greater, indeed, than that between the fancy and the imagination, but of a character very strictly analogous. It will be found, in fact, that the ingenious are always fanciful, and the *truly* imaginative never otherwise than analytic" (531).

16. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper, 1958), 141-42.

17. For an interpretation of the tale which argues that it is the *narrator* who embodies the conscience or superego rather than the "double," see Ruth Sullivan, "William Wilson's Double," *Studies in Romanticism* 15 (1976): 253-63.

18. Such a notion of the superego's archaic sources is, moreover, in line with Freud's account of the superego in his "second topography": "Thus in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harboured residues of the existences of countless egos; and, when the ego forms its super-ego out of the id, it may perhaps only be reviving shapes of former egos and be bringing them to resurrection." Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: Norton, 1960), 28.

19. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Jewish People do not Dream," *Stanford Literary Review* 6 (1989), 198.

20. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 63.

21. Sigmund Freud, "Dissection of the Personality," *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1965), 56. For the inscription of an originary sociality in Freud's concept of identification, see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, "The Jewish People Do not Dream," and their earlier treatment of the issue in "La Panique Politique," *Confrontations* 2 (1979): 33-57. See also Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's book-length consideration of the problem, *The Freudian Subject,* trans. Catherine Porter (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1988).

22. Freud, "Dissection of the Personality," 57.

23. Freud, "Dissection of the Personality," 60.

24. Thus the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" speaks of the "Usher race" and the congruence, even identity, between the family's estate and the "accredited character of the people" (399). So too Egaeus, in "Berenice," simultaneously erases his immediate family and affirms a greater "racial" inheritance: "My baptismal name is Egaeus; that of my family name I will not mention. Yet there are no towers in the land more time-honored than my gloomy, gray, hereditary halls. Our line has been called a race of visionaries . . ." (209). As early as "MS. Found in a Bottle," Poe makes use of this double maneuver: "Of my country and of my family I have little to say. . . . Hereditary wealth afforded me an education of no common order, and a contemplative turn of mind . . ." (135). Whatever Poe's biographical motivation for this characteristic anti-familial gesture, I would simply underscore that the gesture is not one of repudiation of the social, the sign of Poe's hermeticism, but is rather a technique for bypassing familial mediation in an effort to get more directly at an expanded notion of the social influences on the individual with a "contemplative turn of mind." It is in "William Wilson" that the lineaments of this social world appear most legibly.

25. Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990). Warner is following through on some reflections of Derrida's on the role of signature and self-writing in

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28. For an account of Poe
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29. Samuel Weber, *The Le*

political declarations. See Jacques Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," trans. Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper, *New Political Science* 15 (1986): 7-15.

26. Thematically, this account of the prescriptive power of ideology evidently recalls Althusser's memorable notion of ideological hailing. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy,* trans. Ben Brewster (New York: New Left Books, 1971), 127-86.

27. Mabbott notes that Poe derived his interest in exergues from Bielfeld's *L'Erudition Universelle,* which defines the exergue as "the portion of the design [on a coin] found beneath the ground on which are placed the figures portrayed" (449). According to the *OED,* the exergue has an affinity with the signature, since it is the "space . . . for any minor inscription, the date, the engraver's initials, etc." The *OED* further notes that the English word was probably fabricated from Greek roots (*ex-*, [out] plus *ergon* [work]) to approximate the French *hors-d'oeuvre;* in French, exergue retains this sense of material which is prefatory in nature. The exergue thus combines a number of motifs centering on the outside of a work, that which lies "beneath the ground" of the "figures portrayed," which precedes that portrayal as a prefatory inscription. When Poe has Wilson liken his own formation to the inscription of an exergue, he draws attention to the way in which Wilson's origin is itself preceded by, indeed effected by, an aboriginal marking: it is an admission that one's signature, that which grants identity and the possibility of the self's circulation, is written by others in a prefatory prescription. To liken the self to a coin is, of course, also to emphasize the necessity of that self's circulation, its commitment to publicity; and to describe the self as a prefatory inscription is to make that circulation a textual affair.

28. For an account of Poe's architectural thematics, see Joseph Riddel, "The 'Crypt' of Edgar Poe," *Boundary* 2 7 (1979): 117-41.

29. Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982), 58.